



The World Crisis, 1618-1683

The mid-17th-century World Crisis – the series of violent economic, social, intellectual and political upheavals that afflicted most regions of this planet between 1618 and 1683 – cries out for systematic study. Although not the only known global catastrophe, it was the first to leave abundant records worldwide, and its scale defies description. The economic and social crisis led to the death of millions and forced millions more to live in misery. At the same time, a worldwide wave of violence, aggression, rebellion and war toppled or threatened governments around the world. In China, the last Ming emperor committed suicide when rebels seized his capital (1644) and it took 40 years of civil war for a new dynasty (the Qing) to restore order. In both Muscovy and Poland, major revolts began in 1648 and the ottoman Sultan was murdered. In Britain, after seven years of civil war, rebels tried and executed King Charles I in 1649, provoking a new round of revolts in Scotland and the Anglo-Atlantic. Waves of rebellions almost overwhelmed the French and Spanish Monarchies in the 1640s.

Coincidence cannot explain so many simultaneous eruptions of violence and revolution around the globe: what, then, were its causes and why did it affect some areas far more than others? My explanation involves a combination of five factors: a sudden episode of "global cooling"; the emergence of vulnerable areas of economic specialization; a sharp increase in religious and fiscal pressure by many (but not all) governments; the crumbling of the prevailing demographic regime; and the emergence of radical new ideologies. The interplay of these five elements produced major crises worldwide.

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